Caltrans
Division of Transportation Planning
Office of Community Planning

Public Participation
Guide

August 6, 2002

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The *Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making* document was prepared by Howard/Stein-Hudson Associates, Inc., and Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade, and Douglas for the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration. The federal document has been disseminated in the interest of information exchange, and it does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation.

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Public Participation Guide

Introduction

The federal Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) and its predecessor, the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act are both emphatic about the role of public participation in the transportation decision-making process. The Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice (1994), Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration Interim Policy on public involvement, and a host of other federal laws and regulations all require public involvement in transportation decision making.

Caltrans' policy equally requires that the delivery of transportation programs be consistent with the requirements of these relevant laws, including Environmental Justice requirements to involve all constituents as a precondition to using federal funds for transportation improvements. Caltrans supports a balanced representation of all stakeholders in the planning process and considers it a good planning practice to seek out and consider the needs of all stakeholders, especially those that are traditionally underserved.

In order to meet these legal requirements and enhance the Department's ability to reach out to the traditionally underserved, the Division of Transportation Planning executed a two-year Planning Public Participation Contract with Jones & Stokes Associates, Inc. beginning in the upcoming fiscal year (FY 02/03). This contract will allow the Department to engage the public and to facilitate consultation with Indian Tribal Governments; and will assist transportation planners in designing and implementing public involvement programs to achieve compliance TEA-21 and other planning requirement regarding the involvement of low-income and minority populations. The on-call services for this enhanced public involvement include: refining and updating existing public participation mailing lists; marketing and promoting public participation events as well as facilitating consultation with tribal governments; conducting and facilitating planning meetings; providing resources and technology to enhance public participation; and, providing measurable results of planning meetings.

This greater emphasis that is being placed on the need for more public involvement is borne out of the realization that there are tangible benefits to this inclusive planning practice as well as a recognition of fairness and equity. A public that is well informed regarding the transportation decision-making system and processes can be a more

effective partner in shaping California's transportation future. Including the public early in the planning process will result in the following items:

1. Increased credibility,

2. Greater public support and trust,

3. Projects that better reflect the interest and needs of the community, and

4. More efficient use of public resources in the future because projects will move forward smoothly, with less need for re-evaluation.

To maximize the potential and benefit of public involvement, and to adequately respond to and meet the requirements of federal and state legislation and mandates, and Caltrans' policies and goals, this Public Participation Guide has been prepared. This draft document has been developed by the Office of Community Planning to provide assistance to Caltrans employees that currently need reference material in dealing with and developing public participation plans.

Guiding Principles for Public Participation Efforts

Developing an effective public participation plan/program is a strategic effort that requires assembling a selection of techniques to meet the needs of a given transportation plan, program, or project. There is great flexibility available in developing specific public participation plans/programs. Every situation is different, depending on the desired outcome (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower) and each approach to the specific public involvement challenge will be unique.

Whether designing a public involvement plan/program for a statewide or regional planning study or for an individual transportation investment, it is wise to pursue a systematic thought process based on fundamental guidelines and to follow a series of incremental steps. Five fundamental public participation guidelines include the following items:

1. **Adhere to Democratic Principles**

   Public participation is more than simply following legislation and regulations. In a democratic society, people have opportunities to debate issues, frame alternative solutions, and affect final decisions in ways that respect the roles of decision-makers. Knowledge is the basis of such participation. The public needs to know details about a plan or project to evaluate its importance or anticipated costs and benefits. Department goals should reflect community goals. Through continued interaction with the entire community, the department can build community support and, more importantly, assure that the public has the opportunity to help shape the substance of plans and projects.

2. **Maintain Continuous Contact**

Continuous contact between the department and non-department people throughout transportation decision-making is vital. This contact should be established from the earliest stages that a transportation issue arises, through defining purpose and need, through the development of a range of potential solutions, and up to the decision to implement a particular solution.

3. Use a Variety of Public Involvement Techniques

Use of a variety of public involvement techniques that target the general public, groups, and/or individuals is imperative. A single, one-size-fits-all approach usually results in missing many people. Examples of a variety of public involvement techniques and strategies are presented in a subsequent section of this document.

4. Provide Active Outreach

It is important for a successful public participation effort to provide active outreach. This means the department in general, and the project specific outreach staff should search out the public and work hard to elicit their involvement. Even if resources are limited and the department cannot make anyone participate, success can be achieved by going after the public and changing unsuccessful public participation approaches. Public outreach should be a proactive and concerted effort that selects public participation techniques that will meet the needs of the situation and public.

5. Focus Participation on Decisions

The focus of public participation should be on decisions rather than on conducting participation activities because they are required. Decisions include both the continuous stream of informed decisions made by department staff and lower-level management, and the less frequent formal decisions made by decision-makers. Timely department response to ideas from the public and integration of ideas from the public into decisions shows the public that participation is worthwhile. A focus on the wide range of possible decisions gets the department past simply offering the public passive opportunities to comment on proposals just before formal decision-making occurs.

Developing a Public Participation Plan

The following five steps form one approach to systematically setting up and implementing a public involvement plan/program for a specific plan, program, or project:

1. Set Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives should be derived from the specific circumstances of a given transportation plan, program, or project. What decisions, formal or informal, are to be made? When? By whom? What public input is needed?

Public input can be in the form of a consensus on a plan or a buildable project, such as a high occupancy vehicle lane or a safety project(s). Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees enthusiastically, but that all influential groups and individuals can live with a proposal.

Public input can also be in the form of information used by staff or decision makers. Agencies use the objectives to form the public involvement plan/program. The more specific the objectives, the better they will guide the public participation plan/program.

2. Identify the People

The general public and stakeholders (those directly affected, such as impacted public agencies, abutting property owners, etc.) should be contacted and informed concerning the project and the public participation opportunity/process. The review of who is affected directly and indirectly, as well as those who have shown past interest should be considered.

It is important to look for people who do not traditionally participate, such as minorities and low-income groups. What information do they need to participate? What issues or decisions affect which specific groups or individuals? How can their ideas be incorporated into the decisions/decision making process?

Usually, the aforementioned steps (goals/objectives and identifying the people) interact and are conducted simultaneously. In addition to brainstorming and analysis by staff, ask members of the public for their input on the goals, objectives, and names of people who might be interested. This can be done through key person interviews, focus groups, or public opinion surveys.

3. Develop a General Approach and/or Strategies

This step involves the development of a general approach or strategies that are keyed to the goals and objectives of the involvement plan/program and the characteristics of the target audiences. For example, if an objective is to find out what people think about a given proposal, then techniques for eliciting viewpoints should be considered (i.e., public opinion surveys, focus groups, etc.).

A general approach considers the department/agency's resources of time, money, and staff. A general approach can be visualized in terms of a principal technique; for example, a civic advisory committee or different activities keyed to specific planning or project decisions. A general approach could also be viewed as a focus on one or more public groups or interests. Members of the public should be solicited for ideas on the general approach and whether the people to be reached find the general approach acceptable.

The development of strategies are items that fit the target audience in terms of what input is desired and the consideration of special needs and/or circumstances. For

example, people underserved by transportation (such as people with disabilities, low income, poorly educated, etc.) often do not participate in the decision making process. They not only have greater difficulty getting to jobs, schools, recreation, and shopping than the population at large, but often are unaware of transportation proposals that could dramatically change their lives. Strategies need to be used to reach these people to include them in the public participation process.

Consideration should be given to past public participation experience regarding what has worked and what did not work in the past. Also, new approaches and strategies should be considered before the public participation plan/program is finalized.

4. Finalize and Implement the Approach/Strategies

This step involves a decision on the public participation approach and/or strategies that will be used. The selected public participation techniques should fit the specific project purpose and needs of the public. Sometimes the approaches that fit the general public do not fit specific groups well and result in lack of attendance at meetings. Groups should be given an opportunity to come together and for the general public to review what the groups have contributed.

5. Monitor and Evaluate

The public participation approach, strategies, and techniques should be monitored and evaluated for necessary adjustments and corrections. The following questions should be asked: Are many people participating with good ideas? Are key groups participating? Is the public getting enough information as a basis for meaningful input? Are staff and decision makers getting adequate public information when it is needed?

During the public participation process, it could be helpful to ask participants the following questions, who is missing from the participation process? How can missing participants be attracted? De the participants think the discussion is full and complete? Do they think the department is responsive? Is participation rewarding/beneficial? If not, why?

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Public Participation Tools/Strategies

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Potential public participation tools and strategies include the following items (for an inventory of what the different functional units within the Department are doing in terms of informing and involving the public in planning, project development, and implementation activities see the Office of Community Planning Public Participation web site *http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/ocp/pp_inventory.htm*):

1. Civic/Citizens' Advisory Committee

A civic or citizens' advisory committee is a representative group of stakeholders that meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern. The advisory committee is a

public participation tool where the department can present goals and proposed programs. It provides a continuing forum for bringing peoples' ideas directly into the process and a known opportunity for people to participate.

The advisory committee molds participants into a working group. It is a democratic and representative of opposing points of view, with equal status for each participant in presenting and deliberating views, and allows the members to be heard. The output of an advisory committee helps the department monitor community reactions to policy, proposals, and progress.

A citizens' advisory committee has the following features:

- Interest groups from throughout the state or region are represented,

- Meetings are held regularly,

- Comments and points of view of participants are recorded,

- Consensus on issues is sought but not required, and

- The advisory group is assigned an important role in the process.

2. Collaborative Task Force

A collaborative task force is a group assigned to a specific task, with a time limit for reaching a conclusion and resolving a difficult issue, subject to ratification by official decision-makers. Its membership usually includes local people or representatives from interest groups, appointed by elected local people or representatives from interest groups, appointed by elected officials or agency executives. Agency staff people are frequently assigned to provide technical support. Collaborative task forces have been used on a project level and for resolving issues within a project.

Although a collaborative task force and an advisory committee focus on similar issues, each plays a different role in the decision-making process. An advisory committee acts primarily in an advisory role, studying issues and presenting a mosaic of opinion to the department. By contrast, a collaborative task force usually helps solve a specific problem, working strenuously toward consensus and presenting a strong and unified voice.

A collaborative task force includes the following features:

- A sponsoring agency is committed to the process,

- There is a broad range of representative interests,

- There is an emphasis on resolving an assigned issue through consensus,

7

- Detailed presentations of material and technical assistance for complete understanding of context and subject matter is provided, and

- There are several meetings to understand and deliberate the issues.

3. Focus Groups

A focus group is a tool to gauge public opinion. Borrowed from the marketing and advertising industry, it regards transportation as a product that can be improved and the public as customers for that product. It is a way to identify customer concerns, needs, wants, and expectations. A focus group informs sponsors of the attitudes and values that customers hold and why. It can help drive development of policies, programs, and services and the allocation of resources.

Specifically, a focus group is a small group discussion with professional leadership. A carefully selected group of individuals convenes to discus and give opinions on a single topic. Participants are selected in two ways: random selections is used to assure representation of all segments of society; and non-random selection is used which helps elicit a particular position or point of view. A combination of selection techniques can result in a focus group of people well versed in transportation issues along with those who are solely consumers of transportation services.

A focus group has the following basic features:

- A carefully-crafted agenda, with five or six major questions at most;

- Emphasis on gathering perspectives, insights, and opinions of participants through conversation and interaction;

- Identification of major points of agreement and divergence of opinions;

- Minimal presentation of material to set context and subject;

- Gleaning, not shaping, of opinions or perspectives;

- Eight to twelve participants; and

- Understanding that the participants' role is to give personal insights and perspectives.

4. Mailing List

A mailing list is an important public participation building block that provides simplicity, ease, flexibility, efficiency, and speed. Mailing lists can be used throughout planning and project development to keep a thumb on the pulse of the community and other key people. The mailing lists allow the department to reach

an audience with announcements of upcoming events, meeting invitations, newsletters, summary reports, and other information about events and activities.

5. Public Information Material

Public information materials are materials that provide information about a transportation investment that is underway or in the planning stage. The material can be printed, audio, video, or tactile. Public information materials are an essential form of communication in any public involvement process.

Public information materials communicate quickly, are often visually appealing, and many not include a great deal of detail. A sample range of public information materials include the following items:

- Advertising – display and legal notices
- Badges and buttons
- Billboards
- Brochures
- Display boards
- Electronic media
- Fact sheets
- Fliers
- Grocery bags
- Magnets
- News articles
- News Conferneces
- Newsletters
- Newspaper inserts and articles
- Web sites
- Posters
- Press releases
- Progress bulletins
- Public service announcements
- Utility bill stuffers
- Video tapes
- Etc.

6. Key Person Interview

A key person interview is a one-on-one talk about a specific topic or issue with an individual recognized or designated as a community leader. A key person might be an opinion leader, a spokesperson for the community, an elected official, the head of an organization, or a representative of the local media.

The main purpose of a key person interview is to obtain information. While basic information is provided to set the stage for discussion, interviews are designed

primarily to elicit the interviewee's reactions and suggestions. The goal is to learn about the person's views and constituency, and his/her perceptions of the department, the planning or development process, or other issues. Interviews should start early in the public involvement process to learn about the area and other issues and concerns.

7. Community Briefing

Community briefings are information meetings with a community group and/or leader. Elected officials, business leaders, the media, regional groups, or special interest groups can participate. Briefings usually involve issue-focused communication between agency administrators, project managers, board members, or other staff and a specific group or part of the community.

Community briefings can be organized via one-on-one meetings with key individuals, key groups, or the general community. The briefings can also be used at critical times during a project and used for one-way (i.e., to convey information) or two-way (i.e., question and answer time, etc.) communication.

8. Video Tape Release

Video techniques use recorded visual and oral messages to present information to the public. Videos are a great tool to use during public meetings, forums, and workshops. They are used to introduce people to meetings and hearings, to document and/or explain a planning process, to illustrate different planning scenarios or project alternatives in an effort to help people visualize a situation before, during, and after construction, and videos help ensure that a consistent message is conveyed during a series of meetings or other events.

9. Telephone Techniques

The telephone offers a unique, two-way medium for public involvement. It can be used to obtain information and to give opinions. Its use has entered a new era of potential applications to community participation, going beyond question and answer techniques toward the evolving new multi-media connections with television and computers.

Potential telephone techniques for public involvement include the following items:

- Auto attendant, a series of tiered recordings leading an inquirer to a recorded answer or the appropriate staff person;

- Information bureau, a staff person responds orally to a broad variety of standard queries, such as bus schedules or meeting dates;

- Email, a staff person responds to computer queries;

- Hotline or voice bulletin boards, a staff person or recording answers questions about a specific project or program;

- FAX-on-demand, a recorded message provides a menu of documents available by FAX and how to obtain them;

- Telethon, a telephone call-in for comments during a television program;

- Electronic town meeting, a telephone call-in combined with a scheduled television program, which shows results of public calls;

- Interactive voice response system, information retrieval from a main computer using telephones or terminals; and

- Interactive cable television information, a series of information boards or videos that can be called up by phone to a television screen.

10. Public Opinion Survey

Public opinion surveys assess widespread public opinion. The surveys are administered to a sample group of people via a written questionnaire or through interviews in person, by phone, or by internet or other electronic media. The limited sample of people is considered representative of a larger group.

Survey results show public positions or reactions to department actions and gather information for use in the process. Surveys can be formal (scientifically assembled and administered) or informal.

11. Media Strategies

Media strategies inform customers about projects and programs through newspapers, radio, television and videos, billboards, posters, and variable message signs (also referred to as changeable message signs), mass mailings of brochures or newsletters, and distribution of fliers. Working with the media, the department can take an active role in disseminating information. For example, the San Francisco area's annual "Beat the Backup" program during California Rideshare Week promotes ridesharing in partnership with a full range of the media.

Media strategies are important for several reasons. They allow the department to proactively frame the message, rather than allowing the media to do it, they deliver uniform messages, and because many people rely heavily on the media for information about events, plans, or projects that affect them. Media coverage will also assist with generating public interest, and the media can disseminate information widely throughout California.

12. Speakers' Bureau

Speakers' bureaus are groups of specially trained representatives who can speak about a process or program. They can be community people or department staff. Bureau members meet with public and private organizations and groups on behalf of a project, program or planning activity. Members of a speakers' bureau provide information about planning or project activities, listen to people's concerns, answer questions, and seek continued participation and input from the public.

13. Face-to-Face Meeting

Meetings provide a time and place for face-to-face contact and two-way communication. Face-to-face meetings are a dynamic component of public involvement that helps to break down barriers between people and the department. Through meetings, people learn that the department is not a faceless, uncaring bureaucracy and that the individuals in charge are real people. Meetings give the department a chance to respond directly to comments and dispel rumors or misinformation.

14. Public Meeting/Hearing

Public meetings present information to the public and obtain informal input from community residents. Held throughout the planning process, they are tailored to specific issues or community groups and are either informal or formal. Public meetings have been used for many years to disseminate information, provide a setting for public discussion, and get feedback from the community.

A public hearing is a more formal event than a public meeting. Held prior to a decision point, a public hearing gathers community comments and positions from all interested parties for public record and input into decisions. Public hearings are required by the Federal government for many transportation projects and are held in transportation circulation newspapers and they cite the time, date, and place of the hearing. The period between notice and hearing dates provides time for preparing comments for submission to the department or an agency. During this period, the department/agency accepts questions and provides clarification.

Public meetings and hearings have these basic features:

- Anyone may attend, as either an individual or a representative of specific interests;

- Meetings may be held at appropriate intervals; hearings are held near the end of a process or sub-process before a decision;

- Hearings require an official hearing officer, meetings do not;

- Hearings usually have a time period during which written comments are received; and

- Community comments are recorded in written form as input to the department or an agency.

15. Open House

An open house is an informal setting in which people get information about a plan or project. It has no set, formal agenda. Unlike meetings, no formal discussions and presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally from exhibits and staff, and are encouraged to give opinions, comments, and preferences to staff either orally or in writing.

16. Open Forum

An open forum hearing expands a public hearing to include elements of an open house. In addition, after reviewing exhibits and talking with staff, participants can comment on a proposal for the formal transcript of the public hearing. Open forum hearings require formal notice, even though the hearing if self is informal.

17. Conferences

A conference is a highly structured program of presentations and discussions. Conferences usually have an overall theme, with multiple related sessions throughout the day. The can have presentations or panel discussions followed by questions. Top officials or panels of recognized experts help boost interest in attendance. Conferences often have plenary sessions attended by all participants, followed by breakout sessions on various elements. Conferences are as short as half a day or as long as three to five days.

18. Workshops

A workshop is a task-oriented meeting organized around a particular topic or activity. Typically, it involves a relatively small group (20-40) and addresses aspects of a narrowly defined topic. Workshops are usually one to three hours in duration for small groups to work on specific agenda items. Because they are relatively short and task-focused, workshops can be part of a larger meeting, conference, or retreat.

19. Charrettes

Intensive sessions where participants create or review concepts and/or designs and are empowered to work together to support the results of their efforts in future planning efforts. Charrettes are invaluable as they allow participants to understand several sides of the issues—usually very graphically--and the resulting "buy-in" or consensus most usually has a positive effect in reducing opposition down the road.

20. Retreats

Retreats are workshops held in non-traditional settings without distractions. A retreat is especially useful to work on personal conflict resolution and communication. Participants give their undivided attention to specific issues without interruptions for phone calls or everyday distractions. Like workshops, retreats are typically task-oriented and work on focused topics. Because of the complexity of an issue or topic, a retreat may require one full day and sometimes longer.

21. Drop-in Center

A drop-in center is a place for give-and-take exchange of transportation information within a neighborhood or community. An easy-to-find location on home turf makes it convenient and easy for people to get information on a program or plan, and to express their concerns and issues. A drop-in center offers informal, continuing contact with the community. It can have other names such as field office, site office, or clearinghouse.

A drop-in center has the following characteristics:

- It is visible to the community; an office, storefront, or trailer in any visible, accessible, and convenient location within a project area or corridor;

- It can be mobile, using a van or trailer, to maximize contact with various stakeholders;

- It is open during specific, regular hours, not just occasionally or sporadically;

- It is usually in existence for a designated period of time, such as during the planning or construction phase of a project; and

- It is usually staffed by planning, project, and/or liaison personnel knowledgeable about the area and the issues.

22. Site Visits

Site visits encourage the public to visit the transportation site to receive information, view, and discuss the unique features and issues pertaining to the particular project or study. For example, if a study was going to examine transportation infrastructure and land use issues pertaining to safety, mobility, access, reciprocal impacts, etc., then the public and/or selected group could be invited to tour the location/corridor and participate in the project review. This can be an excellent way to begin a project after the initial orientation meeting. It allows the participants to receive a first-hand view and experience concerning the dynamic issues and situation pertaining to the project.

23. Non-Traditional

Non-traditional meeting places and events include shopping malls, agricultural fairs, community or neighborhood fairs and events, local buildings and events, community sports events, transportation fairs, and education institutions (i.e., colleges, public and private schools, etc.).

24. Computer Presentations/Simulations

Computer presentations and simulations are electronic displays of information. Their power is derived from a computer's ability to provide quick access to enormous stores of data and its capacity to display and rearrange images on demand. They can be used in a community visioning process, and can assist communities in considering a number of alternatives and examining the "before-and-after" aspects of a proposed project.

25. Computer-based polling

These polling systems—also referred to as "audience response systems"-- may be expensive; however, they can provide planners with instant responses from the public and the possibility of near-real time analysis of results from a broad audience (including demographic analysis of participants)--without that audience fearing loss of anonymity.

Improving Meeting/Event Attendance

It is important to have high attendance at transportation related meetings and events. High attendance helps ensure a broader range of input, and this in turn enables staff to identify additional issues and see new perspectives. The more inclusive a process, the greater its credibility and the more likely it is to produce usable input.

Widespread participation also enhances public awareness about a plan or project. When people get involved in a meaningful exchange of ideas on transportation issues, they are likely to spread the word to friends and neighbors. It is also crucial when an elected body such as a legislature or regional transportation planning agency board must ratify a plan.

Broad participation from the beginning of a process aids consensus building at its end. When people are instrumental in shaping the vision for a project or plan and have been involved in working through issues and alternatives, they are more likely to be supportive of the final results.

Listed below are some important strategies for achieving high attendance at public meetings/events:

1. A positive and responsive department/agency attitude is essential;

2. Value the public's input;

3. Translate the community's input into real decisions;

4. Clearly determine the meeting/event's purpose;

5. The type of meeting, as well as its style, should be based strategically determined;

6. Staff should identify the desired participants and their special needs;

7. Have a clear agenda;

8. Meeting times and locations should optimize the people's ability to participate;

9. Thoughtfully prepared and coordinated materials should convey the appropriate level and kind of information;

10. Sufficient notice well in advance of a meeting/event helps the attendees set aside time for preparation and attendance;

11. Follow-up a meeting notice by mail, phone, or FAX;

12. Feature the respective agency board or staff members as guest speakers;

13. Evaluate outreach efforts after a meeting/event;

14. Maintain interest through follow-up via thank-you letters, surveys, reports, etc.;

15. Court press coverage and establish good media relations; and

16. Use newspapers, radio, and/or television coverage as a cost-effective alternative to reach broad segments of the public.

Conclusion

This Public Participation Guide has been prepared to only assist those Caltrans employees that need immediate information and assistance with their efforts to develop public participation plans. Questions concerning the Department's public participation program should be directed to Tom Neumann, Chief, Office of Community Planning, (916) 651-6882; Ken Baxter, Chief, Community Planning Branch, (916) 654-2719; or Del Deletetsky, Community Planning Branch/Public Participation Program Manager, (916) 651-6008.